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Short notes on the birds of Fezzan and Tripolitania

by C. Erard

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After reading the notes by Bundy and Morgan, we thought it would be worth giving a brief selection from some observations made during the expedition by the C.R.M.M.O., Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, to Libya from 25th March to 15th May, 1966. The main object was to collect data on the spring migration especially in Fezzan, the results of which will be published elsewhere (Erard and Larigauderie in prep.) The expedition entered Libya from Tunisia, followed the coast to Misurata, reached Bu Gren, thence to Sebha via the Fezzan road. In Fezzan we visited Ajjal, south-west to the Tin Abunda area, Chati west to Berguen, thence south to Murzuk, Traghen and Umm-el-Araneb. The same way was followed to return from Sebha to Tunisia.

We wish to thank Mr. C. W. Benson, who has been kind enough to assist in the drafting of the entire text in English.

Falco biarmicus Lanner Falcon

We have nothing to add to knowledge of the range of this falcon, which is well distributed in Tripolitania and Fezzan. It is worth mentioning some hunting behaviour recorded at El Hamman near Socna. On 1st April a pair, which regularly frequented the oasis, attacked in concert a male Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus* which was hunting near some tamarisks. While one of the falcons (from its size probably the female) chased it at the same level, the other swooped down on it almost vertically. The harrier managed to escape by flying close to the ground among the tamarisks. It might be thought that the falcons were trying to catch the harrier, but the following observations suggest an alternative explanation. About one hour after the incident just described, one of the falcons was seen harrying a Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis* which was carrying a Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* in its claws. It followed every twist and turn of the raven in its endeavour to escape until the raven dropped the wagtail, which was grabbed in the air by the falcon, who flew off with it. The raven followed the falcon in an endeavour to reclaim the prey. It was joined by several other ravens until eventually the falcon dropped the prey, which was immediately regained in the air by the raven. But as soon as its "companions" had disappeared, the raven was again chased in flight by the falcon, and obliged to drop the wagtail

to the ground, where it was regained by the falcon, who then disappeared with it.

Falco peregrinus Peregrine Falcon

Falco pelegrinoides Barbary Falcon

The true status of these two species in Libya is not known. There are no breeding records from Tripolitania and Fezzan. *F. pelegrinoides* has been collected in northern Tripolitania at Sabratha in March and Bu Gheilan in November (Cavazza 1932), and in Fezzan several times in the Ghat area in October and March, and at Serdeles on 2nd April (Moltoni 1934, 1938). There are visual records of one species or the other from Fezzan at Sebha, Murzuk, Traghan and Brak in autumn (between 17th September and 13th October: Snow, in Guichard 1955), and 100 miles south of Gatrün in September (Tuck 1959). All of the foregoing records may concern migrants, but *F. pelegrinoides* may breed in the Ghat and Serdeles areas.

At Ubari, 150 miles east-north-east of Serdeles, on the evening of 20th April a falcon was seen which was identified as an *F. pelegrinoides*. It was lighter and smaller than *F. peregrinus*, and showed clearly a rufous patch on the nape. It was hunting by some palm-groves, and disappeared along the line of cliffs forming the southern border of the Edeyin Ubari. On 26th April and again on 3rd May a probable *pelegrinoides* was seen at the small lake of El Jedid near Sebha. The foregoing records may be useful for the guidance of future workers.

Gallinula chloropus Moorhen

We confirm the breeding of the Moorhen at the lake of El Jedid near Sebha (see Guichard, and also Tuck who saw chicks on 27th June). We think that Guichard was right when he estimated the population at *ca* 50 pairs but an accurate census is almost impossible by visual recording because the vegetation (reeds and tamarisks) is so dense in this place. Egg-shells (recent hatchings) were noted on 25th April.

Cursorius cursor Cream-coloured Courser

Along the Fezzan road on 23rd March this species was noted in sub-desertic habitats from south of Misurata to about 50 miles south of Bu N'gem. There were plenty between Misurata and Ghedaia, flocks of up to 20 being recorded on several occasions. Further south, only isolated pairs were noted. They were apparently on their breeding grounds but were not yet nesting. On 31st March three were seen at El Hamman, and on 1st April there was a single bird in an area covered with low shrubs of *Chenopodiacea* at the entrance to the Chati Valley, 70 miles north of Sebha. Along the Fezzan road on 12th May we had the same experience as on 23rd March, but did not see any birds where they had been seen on 31st March and 1st April. Nevertheless on the Fezzan road the birds were then scattered in pairs and attending chicks. One brood of two less than one week old was discovered.

Sterna albifrons Little Tern

In support of the breeding observations of Bundy and Morgan, two pairs were seen on the coast between zuara and the Tunisian boundary on 15th May. From their demonstrative behaviour, it was obvious that the birds were breeding, but we did not have the time to search for nests. Our conviction that they were breeding was reinforced later the same day, when birds were seen displaying in the same manner near Bahiret-el-Biban in Tunisia, and several clutches of eggs were found.

Pterocles alchata Pin-tailed Sandgrouse

Three males of this species were identified on 11th May at a pool at El Hamman, among some 200 *P. senegallus* and 100 *P. coronatus*. The latter two species were already present in the oasis when it was visited on 30th March/1st April, but no *alchata* were then seen. El Hamman is at 29° 01' N, 15° 45' E, and is well south of the range as defined by Guichard, who gives Gheria Esc Schergia (30° 23' N, 13° 32' E), as the southernmost locality. The extension might be correlated with unusually heavy rain in April 1966.

Tyto alba Barn Owl

Guichard does not record it from Fezzan. A fresh secondary feather was found on 4th April in the palm-grove at Sebha.

Hirundo obsoleta Pale Crag Martin

Guichard writes of it as occurring sparingly in Fezzan, and gives as localities Brak, Murzuk and Sebha: see also Moltoni (1934), Toschi (1947) and Tuck (1959). We recorded it around the forts of Sebha and Murzuk though not at Brak. It appeared to be well distributed in the oasis of the Uaddi Ajjal Valley from Labiod to Ubari (i.e. half a dozen pairs each at Labiod, Bendbeya, Gagra, Touiva, Brek, Greifa and Ubari), and brooding birds were noted on 19th April in covered wells and in the vaults excavated in the tops of artesian wells.

Lanius excubitor Great Grey Shrike

According to Guichard the species is uncommon in Fezzan, and the only autumn records are Snow's from Sebha and Traghen, but he overlooked the records of Moltoni (1938) from the Ghat area and Murzuk. Bundy and Morgan did not find it breeding south of 30° N, though Tuck saw it at Sebha in June. It is of course well distributed as a breeder in northern Tripolitania. Thus on 28th March a pair was feeding a chick just out of the nest between Tagiura and Gasr-el-Garabulli (estimated egg-laying on 20th February), and a pair had a fresh nest, not yet laid in, on 29th March half-way between Misurata and Bu-Gren (there was a larder in an Acacia tree, at which one *Oenanthe oenanthe* and two *Calandrella brachydactyla* were identified). Further south, at El Hamman near Socna on 1st April, an adult was brooding on a nest. At Sebha four pairs were located, two of which were attended respectively by two and three full grown young still under parental care (estimated egg-laying on 20th February in both cases). A few birds, including several fledged young, were seen in the palm-grove at Ubari and in *Acacia raddiana* woodland in the Tin Abunda area between 21st and 23rd April. None were seen at Murzuk and Traghen, but they may have been present in such small numbers that they were overlooked.

At Sebha, in territories of these shrikes, dates were noticed impaled on the terminal spikes of the lower fronds of palms, as reported by Johnson (in Beven and England 1969) and Simmons (1969). Hoarding had probably taken place at the end of the previous year when the dates were ripe. We never saw the birds eat any of these dates. They fed mostly on insects, particularly mole-crickets *Gryllotalpa* around the lake.

Hippolais pallida Olivaceous Warbler

Breeding in Fezzan has not been proven. Guichard mentions birds in song at the lake at Sebha on 27th February, but they might possibly have been winterers. On 28th April we collected a male with slightly enlarged testes in tamarisks by the lake of El Jedid. It was the only example of this species seen there, and proved to be *H. p. opaca*. Like one seen on 23rd April in Thala woodland near Tin Abunda, it might have been on passage. Nevertheless a

territorially behaving pair was located in a private garden well provided with tamarisk hedges as soon as we arrived at Sebha on 3rd April, and was regularly noted until our departure from there on 10th May. Unfortunately we could not obtain permission to search the garden for a nest. A singing bird was also noted on 11th May at El Hamman near Socna in tamarisk scrub.

Sylvia melanocephala Sardinian Warbler

Bundy and Morgan suspected breeding in introduced Acacia scrub near Tripoli in 1966. We saw a pair, the male of which was singing, on 13th May in a similar habitat about 10 miles from Tripoli on the road to Azizia. Breeding on the Tripolitanian coast had already been suspected by Cavazza.

Sylvia cantillans Subalpine Warbler

It has never been recorded as breeding in Fezzan, but as quoted above for *H. pallida*, as soon as we arrived in Sebha a pair was located holding a territory. Fortunately it overlapped a garden to which we had access. The male was ringed, so that it was proved that this pair was present until our departure on 10th May, though no nest was found.

Sylvia nana Desert Warbler

It has already been recorded from Fezzan in the Ghat area, at Uaddi Tanezzuff and Bir Tahala (Moltoni 1934, 1938). Whitaker (1902) recorded it on 10th July at Oumsinerma, a locality not on our maps. Two were seen on 21st April near Tin Abunda, between the Thala woodland and the Edeyin, in an area covered with scattered clumps of herbaceous and woody vegetation invaded by sand.

Scotocerca inquieta Scrub Warbler

Bundy and Morgan are sceptical about the distribution of this species in Tripolitania where it was already mentioned by Whitaker and by Cavazza. It haunts biotopes which look very similar to those of *Sylvia conspicillata* and, as Heim de Balsac and Mayaud (1962) properly write, it is a steppe or attenuated desert bird. We recorded it in fact on a *Chenopodiaceae* steppe respectively 18 and 35 miles from Bu-Gren on the road to Misurata on 12th May. On the first occasion, a pair was located in an area covered with scattered and rather low (20–30 cm) herbaceous clumps; on the second occasion, the species was noted twice in a much denser and higher (up to 1 m) growth of *Limoniastrum*, *Frankenia*, *Atriplex*, *Sueda*, *Halocnemum* and *Salicornia*.

Oenanthe lugens Mourning Chat

According to Guichard, it occurs in Tripolitania south of the Jebel to about 30° N. The few records from Fezzan (a region in which breeding has never been proved) most probably concern only vagrant birds (or a north to south movement outside the breeding season). In western Tripolitania, it has been recorded up to 32° N, but in eastern Tripolitania on our way from Misurata to Sebha, we found it on 28th–29th March and 11th–12th May well distributed between 10 miles south of Bu-Gren (31° N) to Socna (29° N). On 28th March, we saw a male established in a rocky glen in the hills 10 miles west of Homs, and possibly it breeds in this locality.

Rhodopechys githaginea Trumpeter Finch

It had previously been recorded in Fezzan only from Serdeles (Moltoni 1934) and Ghadames (Guichard). During our stay in Ubari from 19th to 24th April, we regularly saw a dozen birds (as many males as females) which often came to drink at a well and looked for seeds on heaps of cereal-sheaves in the company of Desert Sparrows. The finches circulated between the

oasis and the nearby rocky steppe where we located a few of them but failed to discover any nest although, according to their behaviour, the birds were most probably feeding their broods.

Passer hispaniolensis Spanish Sparrow

Contrary to Guichard's opinion and to Bundy and Morgan's implicit statement we do not think that it breeds in Fezzan or even nests in southern Tripolitania. We did not find it breeding south of 20 miles south of Misurata. It is well established, and proved by ringing (Bachkiroff 1953 and C.R.M.M.O.), that in North Africa, outside the breeding season, this sparrow has considerable movements and penetrates into the desert. Thus at El Hamman we saw small flocks on 31st March/1st April but none on 10th/11th May. At Ubari we recorded only a single exhausted female on 20th April, and at Sebha the last birds disappeared on 18th April except for a single female still present on 6th May.

Passer simplex Desert Sparrow

It breeds in all the oases of Fezzan, where it is common, sometimes very abundant (e.g. in Murzuk). Further north, it was recorded at El Hamman (feeding full grown chicks on 11th May), Socna, Hon and Uaddan, but not at Bu N'gem, where Guichard saw a pair on 6th November.

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The Philippine races of the Rufous-capped Grass Warbler *Megalurus timoriensis*

by Kenneth C. Parkes

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For many years all of the Philippine populations of the highly polytypic sylviid species *Megalurus timoriensis* were assigned to a single subspecies, *M. t. tweeddalei* McGregor (new name for *M. ruficeps* Tweeddale, preoccupied, type locality "Monte Alban"=Montalban, Rizal Province, Luzon). Salomonsen (1953) was the first to demonstrate that this species varies within the Philippine archipelago, and he named two new subspecies: *M. t. crex* (Kaatoan Cinchona Plantation, Mt. Katanglad [1250 m. altitude], Bukidnon Prov., Central Mindanao), and *M. t. mindorensis* (Mt. Halcon [8000 ft. altitude], Mindoro), the latter based on a single specimen. New material permitted Ripley and Rabor (1958) to review Salomonsen's work. The two additional races were upheld, but several of the diagnostic characters employed by Salomonsen were shown to be invalid.